ANTONY GORMLEY

LYNNE COOKE - ANTONY GORMLEY

From ANTONY GORMLEY, exh. cat., Salvatore Ala Gallery, Milan/Italy and New York/USA, 1984, Published by Coracle Press, London, revised by the author in 2022

'The image is for me an idea, which doesn't become good until it has physicality.' Antony Gormley, 1981 [1]

'All visible things are emblems; what thou seest is not there on its own account; strictly taken is not there at all: matter exists only spiritually and to represent some idea and body it forth.' Thomas Carlyle, 1836 [2]

The present climate has encouraged many artists to engage with a heightened sense of urgency in an art that is orientated less to its own history than to the world around it. The means by which appropriate themes are tackled are various and diverse but, for many artists, it requires a return to figuration. Some work directly from their immediate experience in order to project a reality which may reference fantastic, private or public realms, or, more likely, an idiosyncratic synthesis of all three. By contrast, others investigate reality as an affect rather than as the source of representation: this often leads to an art that explores the mediations of the real. All take the mind, its imaginative and/or rational powers, as their point of departure. [3] Few have argued that all sources of information depend ultimately on something more rudimentary and immediate - the corporeal body, its functions and mechanisms.

Just as the choice of subject has become a focus of debate so has the tone in which issues are broached. Feints, oblique and elliptical asides are now commonplace, as if only a stance predicated on mockery, irony and skepticism is valid. If, with hindsight, the existentialist vision and heroic diction of the immediate postwar years, with its concern for 'authenticity' and 'commitment,' has assumed, with an innocent even naïve aura, unmediated engagement with the human subject has seldom replaced it. Given the current ambience of self-conscious "sophistication," Antony Gormley's aesthetic and ambition appear at once disarmingly straightforward and unexpectedly bold:

'I am now trying to deal with what it feels like to be human being. To make an image that in some ways comes close to my states of mind. My body is my closest experience of matter and I use it for both convenience and precision. I can manipulate it both from within and without. I want to recapture for sculpture an area of human experience which has been hidden for a while. It is to do with very simple things - what it feels like to look out and see, what it feels like to be cold and frightened, or what it feels like to be absolutely quiet and just aware of the passage of air around your body…' [4]

Gormley's art divests itself in large part of direct references to the art of the past. Equally, it does not attempt to realise its credo from within, that is, by means of a self-reflexive examination of the medium itself, by addressing itself to questions of sculptural definition and innovation:

'Immediate cultural references and certainly references to other forms of art rather than being the inspiration of new art can become the subject of the work - and a recondite language whereby the cognoscenti are made to feel that they are sharing a special experience, I'm not interested in that. I'm tired of art about art.' [5]

Over the past two years Gormley has concentrated increasingly on the motif of the human body as the vehicle through which to make an art whose focus is essentially spiritual, rather than affective, expressive or materialist. For him, Gauguin's WHERE DO WE COME FROM? WHAT ARE WE? WHERE ARE WE GOING? succinctly poses quintessential questions. He argues that a human subject is not firstly a social and cultural animal but a physical being through whose body and senses all experience is mediated. However, bodily experiences never remain at the level of physical sensations but, through introspection and meditation, attain a spiritual dimension. In defining his theoretical platform Gormley not only separates himself to a large extent from immediate contemporaries but positions himself at a remove from the aegis of sculptors who, earlier in the century, grappled with similar ideas (Exceptionally, Brancusi's project for a temple in India, its heightened feelings achieved by means of formal decisions based in condensation, simplification and stillness, is exemplary for him).

Slim and lithe, the naked male figure, running or standing alone in an undifferentiated space or an unidentified milieu, is a leitmotif in much recent art. A simplified avatar, a semiotic cipher, it is often rendered in a deliberately crude or banal style so that it does little more than flag conditions or states of being: much can be omitted because the rules of the game have been so well rehearsed. While many of Gormley's drawings have affinities with this genre, for him, their primary function is that of 'fertile compost'. Through them he tackles ideas and themes which cannot be explored in sculpture. That said, at times they generate suggestions better suited to three-dimensional realisation. Such interconnections notwithstanding, the two modes remain distinct above all, because irrespective of the subject, his sculptures insist on their objectness, on the immutable fact that they are entities invading an actual space, mapping physical terrain. Since their material existence is unquestionable, they make their initial impact as corporeal presences: only with scrutiny do they reveal their ultimate function. Always life-size and always whole, they are neither mere signs nor recognizable individuals. If too schematic they risk losing something of the potency and vitality of animate images; if too specific they become portraits, taking on a specific character and thereby undermining that focus on a state of being which is the artist's principal concern:

'I don't want the work to distract by suggesting a likeness or giving form to features: I want to make you aware of the whole. I want the work to deny the particular in itself so that it can be supplied by anyone who is looking at it.' [6]

Thus, on the one hand, Gormley eschews identifiable situations of the type that invite a description of the figure's behaviour (as occurs in the work of George Segal, for example, where modern dress and contemporary contexts are crucial indicators). On the other hand, he avoids character and emotion. Like Lehmbruck, he often utilizes the single figure in isolation but he never distorts the body in an anti-naturalistic manner for expressive effect. In his realism, Gormley is also far removed from that late nineteenth century preoccupation, stemming from, even as it reached its apogee in, Rodin, which treated the body as the physical mirror of the soul. In Rodin's practice this resulted in fragmentation for greater intensity and eloquence; for those like Lehmbruck, who retained the body intact, it became almost impossible not to privilege the hands and face as the foremost sites of emotional affect. Significantly, Gormley not only conserves the figure as an entity but avoids privileging these elements as the expressive foci by means of a variety of devices which constantly temper the illusionism; which make any understanding of the form inseparable from an awareness of its fabricated nature. For instance, fingers and toes are fused into a single shape; the facial features being broadly handled and the skull generalized, it is the angle at which the head is carried in relation to the rest of the body which proves most telling. Recognition that this object is a container or

sheath and not a surrogate human being is furthered by leaving the welds raw and unfilled, but also by the manner in which joins in the casing constitute a grid similar to that on a geographer's globe. Not only do they rarely outline or articulate the plastic quality of the form beneath, but by establishing an alternative frame of reference, they make evident the fact that the body exists in a gravitational matrix, that it inhabits the external world. Since this web is aligned with the major terrestrial axes, deviations from it caused by unstable poses serve to reinforce this connection. At times, Gormley also cuts holes at strategic points. In addition to their symbolic function, they dramatise the interior hollowness, mediating inner and outer space. In LIFT, 1983, the artist drilled the entire carapace full of holes; lightening the object's weight abstracted the subject.

The modeling of the forms also varies slightly from work to work: sometimes, surface inflections correspond fairly closely to the major planes of the model; elsewhere, the casing is more generalized. Such decisions depend on a variety of factors, including the legibility of the pose, the theme, and the desired viewing distance (squatting or crouching figures invite a closer surveillance). In short, Gormley never attempts to make an exact mould of his body. Indeed, at times he recuts and reshapes limbs for practical reasons: for example; after he broke his arm and was unable to straighten it fully, he remade sections taken from it in order to 'normalise' the figure. If idiosyncratic information is anathema to him, a distraction from the more universal issues at stake, detail may be sacrificed for greater intensity: distilling does not imply refining. The finish is workmanlike not elegant. Representational without being illustrative, Gormley's work aims to be true to experience and feeling as opposed to observation.

In these ways, Gormley may be said to employ the body as an emblem rather than as a surrogate, a demonstration of poses and attitudes as in the case with Lehmbruck, or as a sensuous form as in Rodin. He seeks to evoke a state of being neither illustrated expressively nor conjured in theatrical presentations, as Bernini does, preeminently. Emblematic, generic and static, they invite contemplation rather than narrative interpolation.

Gormley's manner of using the body as emblem is, arguably, less prevalent in Western sculpture than in Indian sculpture where the image of the body often acts as a trigger or starting point for evoking a state of mind. In the West it is icons, rather than statuary, which possibly provide the nearest equivalent. An icon of the Virgin is not a representation of a particular woman, but an image inhabited by her spirit: not a person, but a vehicle for spiritual contact and communion. As such it functions very differently from most representational art created in the West:

'I want the work to function as a vehicle. Sculpture, for me, uses the physical means to talk about the spirit, weight to talk about weightlessness, light to refer to darkness - a visual means to refer to things which cannot be seen.' [7]

Whereas the icon is an intermediary through which the faithful approach the supernatural and thereby transcend the earthly and bodily, in Eastern art the interpenetration of spirit and matter is posited; that is, the spiritual and physical are present within the same form and it is the acuity of the observer which makes the spiritual manifest. For Gormley, sculpture is a perfect art form for such concerns: in the very recognition of obdurate physicality access to disembodied states is made possible:

'The spirit is wholly incarnate in the image of man and I seek to express this through the language of my own body.' [8]

'The musician in India finds a model audience - technically critical, but somewhat indifferent to voice production. The Indian audience listens rather to the song than to the singing of the song: those who are musical, perfect rendering of the song by the force of their own imagination and emotion. Under these conditions the actual music is better heard than where the sensuous perfection of the voice is made a sine qua non.' [9]

Certain ideas key to the aesthetic of Ananda Coomaraswamy, one of Gormley's favourite writers on art, were formative on the British sculptor's artistic practice: the participation of the viewer in determining the affective charge; the involvement with metaphysical issues rather than with virtuosity and self-expression; the valuing of skill as a means not an end; the rejection of beauty and formal harmony as ends in themselves, so they become by-products of ideas fully realised. As points of departure Gormley chooses what might be called rudimentary activities: outward-facing sensory experiences, such as seeing, listening and shitting; internally directed experiences, such as thought and dreaming; and basic categories - animal, mineral and vegetable. In his desire to deal with elementary categories or fundamental experiences, he rigorously abjures any kind of primitivising, whether borrowing from so-called primitive arts or embracing purported archetypes, recognizing that the role of the cultures which appropriate them in making such determinations. Faced with the breakdown of any common language for public sculpture in the later twentieth century, Gormley has concentrated on personal experience of an ordinary, everyday kind, taking as his central image what to him is most convenient and adaptable--his own body-and eliminating distinguishing marks or features, reducing it to a type, not an archetype.

For Gormley, the road to self-realisation-to the well-being of humanity-is achieved by means of a heightened spiritual awareness rather than through psychological and social transformation (through changes in an individual's psychic and material conditions). Art can have a healing function; through catharsis it can intimate some notion of release or relief, he believes. Given its sources as well as its precepts, it might be deemed a religious philosophy rather than a humanist one, for its roots lie in the Catholicism of Gormley's childhood and in Buddhism, with which he became immersed during the three years, 1970-73, that he spent in India. Both systems of belief continue to shape his thinking. If these, and related philosophies, have engaged many artists over the past century what is striking about Gormley's approach is his ability to steer clear of mysticism; that is, he seeks to realise his ideas freshly and intensely through familiar forms. Gormley sees his art as socially engaged, neither escapist nor idealistic:

'The fact that man is daily better equipped to destroy himself and the world and increasingly less in control of his actions is very much in my mind. I am aware of the fragility of our world, of the difficulty people have living together. I think in some way my work faces up to these things… NIGHT is where the hope lies. NIGHT suggests there is a basic analogy between the most basic human experiences and the great forces of nature - that connection is important to me. By what is man to regulate his actions? Firstly through communion with his fellow beings and secondly through communion with the natural world about him. For me the way of understanding is through the latter first. The wilderness is a good tool. NIGHT identifies a human space in space: there is a relationship between the infinity of space within the body and the infinity of the sky.' [10]

Although currently the central motif in Gormley's art is the human body it has appeared intermittently, albeit in different guises and contexts, throughout his oeuvre. Among his earliest sculptures is a series executed upon his return from India in 1973, prior to his attending art school. In these works, a figure lies on the ground, sometimes huddled in a fetal position, sometimes casually stretched out as if in sleep, but always completely enveloped in a sheet. Coated with plaster, the sheet becomes a tent, that at salient points reveals the pressure or impression of the body beneath: a protruding knee, elbow or shoulder. The space contained within the flimsy covering is all that the body seems to possess, as if it could defend only what it displaces. In shrouding the interstices between the body's forms, the cloth creates a cocoon--a nomad's shelter--yet the vulnerability, the defencelessness, engendered by sleep cannot be mitigated by this frail cover. Never exhibited, these formative works prefigure concepts that recur in Gormley's subsequent work.

In ROOM, 1980, a boundary that both contains and identifies the place of existence is demarcated in space by ropes made from shredded clothes. In

BED, 1980-81, the absent form of a recumbent figure is limned in the hollowed form eaten out of a tomblike rectangular block of bread: in MOTHERS PRIDE, 1982, the silhouette of a figure has been chewed out of a grid of sliced bread. Both works point, wryly, to the way in which humanity consumes in order to survive and survives by destroying. Preserving and consuming, presence and absence, natural and manmade, these oppositions are ubiquitous in the realms of matter which constitute the point of departure for THREE BODIES, 1981, a triad of earth-filled lead cases made around a shark, a pumpkin and a rock.

'I wanted to bring together the three realms of matter: something from each of the animal, plant and mineral worlds. The shapes were important - simple and clear… Everything on this planet is earth above ground therefore everything is connected. I have tried to express this in the work by unifying the surface, the time and the physical interior… My first duty is to identify for myself what the world is: that is THREE BODIES.' [11]

Broadly speaking, prior to 1980 Gormley's work dealt with knowledge - he talks of each work being a kind of proposition or debate physically realised - as he attempted to understand the world around him. Since then, he has dealt with experience, with what he feels it is like to be a human being. These concerns stem from Gormley's feeling that objects can no longer fully express what he wants to say, that the body offers a more direct and effective medium:

'Objects are good for understanding the world

because they inhabit the world

body is good for making experience visible

because I inhabit it.' [12]

And, just as he has concentrated increasingly on a single motif, so he has confined himself almost exclusively to a single material: lead.

'Lead brings silence and stillness. It is a wonderful material - it is so inert, so dense, its greyness combines all colours, its quality as an insulator is important. It protects against all forms of radiation - and that is part of its power. It renders things inert but because of its nature that inertia is potent: like a seed.' [13]

The use of verbal and visual puns, conceits and conundrums, homonyms and metonomy in his early works, serving to add layers of meaning and allusion, give way in his recent work to a stronger engagement with writers like Coomaraswamy, Teilhard de Chardin and William Blake. [14] They have reinforced his belief that art has a crucial function to fulfill - 'not only to heal but to prophesy' - and that it must direct itself unequivocally and insistently in the most accessible manner to this end (without, however resorting to illustration or didacticism). That said, the changing emphasis in his work should not be overstated; it is one of degree, not of kind. More than a residue of his former tendency to conflate associations can be found, for example, in STILL FALLING, 1983, a male figure carved into the face of a quarry at Portland. While the form of the body is literally fixed this is not the impression it makes. With its legs and arms vertically aligned, and the head the most legible section of the silhouette, the figure seems to be responding to gravity rather than to be at its mercy: as such, it appears to adapt gracefully to its novel circumstances rather than to fight them; and, in so doing, gains new powers - floating without evident anxiety or tension. In sum, STILL FALLING suggests the transformation that may attend harmonizing with the situation in which one finds oneself, however unprecedented. Similarly, the various examples of MAN ROCK, 1982-83, in each of which the silhouette of a figure is inscribed on the surface of a boulder, attest to the interdependence of the human and the natural world: the body protectively cradles the very form which has given substance to it. Always an important component in Gormley's work, the title, with its echo of 'bedrock', enhances these associations. [15]

By contrast, the lead covered figures seem more self-evident. The artist attributes the greater eloquence and economy in statement to a concentration on issues rather than on formal niceties, but his growing experience with both the material and with the motif surely also contributes to the new sense of authority. This is evident in the choice of gesture in ADDRESS, 1984, whose challenging posture raises questions as to whether the figure is aggressor or respondent; whether playful or insolent; whether a coarse parody of the dignity implicit in statuary or a covert homage to Degas' YOUNG SPARTANS EXERCISING, c.1860. In fact, speculation will quickly come up short, for ADDRESS is not a riddle. There's no fodder for anecdotal musing: nor for an active confrontation between spectator and sculpture-as-other of the kind found in, say, Giacometti's WOMAN FOR VENICE III, 1956. Instead, Gormley solicits an empathetic transference, an identification with the figure itself whose mental state is apprehended intuitively yet impersonally. [16] A better comparison is with Coomaraswamy, who writes: 'This Indian music is essentially impersonal: it reflects an emotion and an experience which are deeper and wider and older than the emotion or wisdom of any single individual… it is in the deepest sense of the words all-human.' [16]

In certain respects ADDRESS may be the most daring of Gormley's works to date. It comes close to establishing a dialogue between observer and object and yet, characteristically, leaves the object-in-itself as the actual point of departure. THREE PLACES, 1983, also eliminates all interchange of this sort while skirting the danger that some kind of anecdotal or narrative relationship might arise between the components. The manner in which they are disposed is crucial in this regard as Gormley concentrates on conveying different stages in an abstract condition: distinct and separate states of being, not moments of becoming.

Tellingly, when engaging states of being which are active, in that they involve interchanges with the external world, such as speaking or walking, Gormley does not always adopt the most graphic of poses. Consider, for example, PASS, 1983-84, conceived as a body walking: the figure takes a step, hands by the side of the body, head raised. Comparison with precedents in Rodin and Giacometti is revealing. Gormley's figure is imbued with a strong sense of motion in the torso, nonetheless, the form seems arrested, perhaps due, in part, to the angle of the head. Certainly, motion is not conceived in terms of a moment frozen in time as Rodin might do; nor is it evoked impressionistically in the manner of Giacomettl, whose figures which are perceived as if at a considerable remove. Rather, it recalls a person skating in that the body seems to move without weight or effort, certain physical limitations or constraints having been temporarily suspended.

'The extraordinary thing is on the one hand the consistency of human feeling and, on the other the infinite variety of ways in which it is expressed.' [17]

Actions and feelings, though familiar, should consequently never appear formulaic. The subjects of THREE CALLS: PASS, CAST AND PLUMB, 1983-84-- thought, speech and action-may be mundane but Gormley eschews any rendering that would suggest they are banal. The multi-figure works invite speculation whether, say, in THREE CALLS, for example, the same body is presented three times or whether three different beings are represented, and if the latter, what distinguishes one from the other? Undecidable, the question becomes moot: what is significant is the range of

experience they encompass. THREE CALLS deals with different means of communication; THREE WAYS: MOULD, HOLE and PASSAGE, 1981-82, with basic bodily functions; THREE PLACES, 1983, with consciousness, and LAND, SEA AND AIR II, 1982, with perception. In LAND, SEA AND AIR II, among the finest of this group, Gormley creates a space that is highly charged yet immeasurable, set apart. In consequence, awareness of the actual space that the figures inhabit gives way to intimations of a purely mental state: space available to the mind alone, a space of meditation.

LAND, SEA AND AIR II uses the body as an agency to experience the elements, by contrast, BOX was inspired by a figure in Blake's copperplates for Jerusalem. Hunched with its head between its knees, the body becomes capsule-kind, emblematic of coming to terms with the void within.

'The element of time that involves the spectator concerns reflection. The work presents a point of stasis between origin and becoming. The spectator completes and in a sense becomes the work, by a reflective action of relinking the work with the world.' [18]

Gormley's concern to establish a sense of stillness within even the most vigorously active of his figural sculptures is, once again, well expressed in Coomaraswamy's words:

'Over against the world of change and separation there is a timeless and spaceless Peace which is the source and goal of all our being.' [19]

The movement from perception of the work to empathic engagement is enhanced by the fact that very often the figures' poses are synthetic. Whereas in ADDRESS, for example, the arms unexpectedly repose within the body rather than extending the challenge outwards, in UNTITLED (DIVING FIGURE), 1983, though the arms are raised, the body as a whole is not poised to spring. The holes in the lead carapace also contribute to the transition the viewer makes from a focus on the form to considerations of innerness. In addition to the strategically located aperture at the vertical apex of each figure, a second opening is made in each component in THREE WAYS, either at mouth, anus or penis, marking sites of emission. In formal terms, these poses approximate to a line, pyramid and sphere. Underscoring allusions to the fundamental and universal through formal and metaphoric means is characteristic of Gormley's language at its richest.

In the art world today, it is unfashionable to openly seek the spiritual; it is also unfashionable to downplay both the contemporary socio-cultural milieu and art-historical heritage - but Gormley is indifferent to questions of fashion. His recent work bears telling witness to a resilient confidence honed from deep-seated convictions.

NOTES

All statements are by the artist unless otherwise indicated.

1. OBJECTS AND SCULPTURE, Bristol and London: Arnolfini/ICA, 1981, p. 18.

2. Thomas Carlyle, SARTOR RESARTUS, quoted by the artist in a letter to the author, January 1984.

3. The sculpture of Baselitz, Paladino and John Ahearn in different ways might be said to belong to the first category, whereas the work of Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman and Hans Haacke, for example, falls into the second. For further discussion of these issues see Hal Foster, 'New York art: seven types of ambiguity' in BRAND NEW YORK, ICA 1982, Douglas Crimp, 'Pictures', OCTOBER, Spring 1979, and Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Post-Modernism', OCTOBER, Summer 1980.

4. Conversation with Paul Kopecek, ASPECTS, No. 25, Winter 1983-84, n.p.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Marginal note made in Ananda Coomaraswamy, THE DANCE OF SHIVA, Bombay, 1948, p. 100.

9. Coomaraswamy, p. 103.

10. From an unpublished conversation with Vicken Parsons, Nov. 1983, n.p.

11. Ibid.

12. Letter to the author, op. cit.

13. Unpublished conversation, op. cit.

14. Gormley tends to reject the use of metaphor on account of its open-ended references, preferring conceits, puns etc. which "wrap themselves up like a syllogism", reinforcing thereby the connectedness of the allusions, as is evident in both FULL BOWL and END PRODUCT.

15. 'The titles are as much a part of the work as finding the material. The process towards certainty is very physical. There is a journey that the work is making from the general to the particular, from the unnamed to the named. This is a physical journey towards recognition which is expressed in name.' OBJECTS AND SCULPTURE, op. cit., p. 18. With the shift in Gormley's work from the object to the figure, from knowledge to experience, titling has become less significant.

16. Coomaraswamy (op. cit., p. III)

17. ASPECTS, op. cit.

18. ASPECTS, op. cit.

19. Coomaraswamy, op. cit., p. 103.